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ABSTRACT

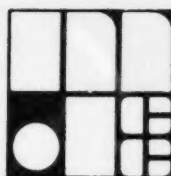
In fall 1975 a study of the General Education program at Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) was initiated to determine the appropriate role of an open-door community college in preparing students to live in and contribute positively to society. The central assumption underpinning the three-year study was that a General Education program should develop and integrate every student's knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences so that he/she can engage in a lifelong process of inquiry and decision making. To effect this goal a systematic approach to the total educational process was developed involving a "core" curriculum of five courses, i.e., the Natural Environment, the Social Environment, Humanities, Communications, and the Individual, plus second-level courses in the humanities, social and natural sciences and elective General Education courses. The changes in the curriculum were complemented by a commitment to continuously monitor student progress and provide guidance from the time of application for admission to graduation. This involves assessment of student abilities on arrival; the matching of individual skills to appropriate programs; the continuous monitoring of student progress by faculty; and the application of computer technology to provide information to students. Established standards of academic performance are maintained through a system of academic warnings and suspensions. An illustration of MDCC's student flow model is appended. (HB)

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Introduction

Fifteen years after the doors to Miami-Dade Community College were opened, the faculty, administration, staff, and students embarked upon a second comprehensive analysis of the College's goals, internal operations, and overall effectiveness. The evaluation process, known as a Self-Study, is a requirement imposed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, an organization with responsibility and authority for awarding or withholding accreditation of colleges and universities in the southern part of the United States. As part of the Self-Study process, outside educators visited Miami-Dade and conducted a thorough review of the College's academic programs and support services.

As the Self-Study progressed, it became apparent that some fundamental changes in the College's directions, academic program, and support services were necessary. The College's General Education program had remained essentially the same for fifteen years. The time was appropriate for the College to undertake major revisions in the General Education curriculum and to initiate new approaches to serving students. What wasn't so clear then, but which subsequently became apparent through the examination of the College's General Education philosophy and curriculum, was that a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of student relationships with the academic and support services of the institution was essential if beneficial and long-lasting changes were to be achieved.

Examining General Education

Thus, the story begins with the study of General Education, a project which started in the Fall of 1975, and took nearly three years to complete. This may seem like a long time to study General Education, but the issues were and remain complex. Decisions were not made until input was sought from faculty throughout the College; and the rapidly changing nature of society and the South Florida community both presented additional factors to be considered. Nevertheless, with persistent work by Miami-Dade faculty, presentations by nationally recognized experts, internal debate, concentrated study, and intensive research, new directions began to emerge. As a result of this effort, Miami-Dade embarked on the development of dramatic alternatives to its existing General Education program. Those changes are described in a book entitled **General Education in a Changing Society**.*

In examining the College's General Education program, the project was guided by a central question: What is the appropriate role of an open door community col-

lege in preparing students to live and contribute positively to our society? The assumption was made that the primary function of a General Education instructional program is to develop and integrate every student's knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences so that the student can engage effectively in a lifelong process of inquiry and decision-making. With this assumption as a central theme, many peripheral issues emerged. Was the open door working? What level of academic achievement constituted success? What do students need to know in the 1980's and 90's? What substance would there be to the new curriculum? What would ensure academic integrity to the new approach? How should the College handle the increasing number of students who lacked the basic skills necessary for success in college-level courses? How could the College encourage more students to complete a program of study? To deal with these and other concerns, it was obvious that they should not be approached as isolated issues. A systematic approach to the total educational process at Miami-Dade Community College was needed.

At the heart of the General Education program now under development at Miami-Dade are five "core courses" of three credits each—the Natural Environment, the Social Environment, Humanities, Communications, and the Individual. In addition to the five core courses, there are second-level or "distribution courses" in English Composition, the Humanities, the Social Sciences, and the Natural Sciences. General Education elective courses comprise a third level of the 36-credit General Education program. All degree-seeking students at Miami-Dade will be required to complete the five core courses.

A guiding principle for the development and implementation of the five General Education core courses, distribution courses, and elective General Education courses has been to establish uniform objectives and understandings about the competencies that students will possess as they complete those courses. When the General Education program has been fully developed, the College administration and the general public can be assured to the greatest extent possible that students leaving the institution through completion of an Associate Degree will possess specifically defined skills that have been identified as necessary to their future success in lifelong pursuits.

As an illustration of the commitment of the General Education program to provide educational experiences that would permit students to live a more fulfilling life, a Physical Education requirement was imposed. Students must select either a Physical Education activities course or a Health Improvement course. The latter is an individualized approach to assessing one's physical strengths and weaknesses and prescribing ways in which individuals can take responsibility for improving their overall health.

The new General Education program provides a

*Jeffrey D. Lukenbill and Robert H. McCabe, **General Education in A Changing Society**, (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1978)

basic framework from which a broader system of academic support has emerged. Underlying the development of the new system has been a belief that more direction, more assessment of individual skills and talents, and more monitoring and follow-up were needed to enhance student success. The focus of the system is on the individual student. If the concept of the open door community college is to remain viable, individual student characteristics and attributes must be dealt with in a direct and honest way. From the time students first send in an application for admission to the time they graduate, the institution must concentrate as never before on individual strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations, and refine its ability to respond educationally.

Incoming students are continuing to evidence a general decline in academic skills. Those students who are experiencing difficulty should be identified as early as possible. A process is then needed for providing support to students who occasionally experience difficulties, as well as to students with serious academic deficiencies. The College must also provide academic challenge and guidance for students with exceptional skills and abilities. The support system must reach across academic disciplines and programs, with flexibility for dealing with varying levels of student preparation. To accomplish this individualized approach, the College must also rely on the creativity and imagination of faculty in their interactions with students. These are the basic principles and assumptions underlying the systematic approach to restructuring the educational program at Miami-Dade.

The changes being made at Miami-Dade are not merely cosmetic; they represent a dramatic shift in focus for the College and a strong commitment to individualize student learning and to maximize student achievement. These goals have long been pursued in higher education; what characterizes the Miami-Dade approach is the unified nature of the separate components of the Student Flow Model that has emerged. A diagram of the Student Flow Model as it relates to students seeking an Associate in Arts degree follows.

Understanding the Student Flow Model

When students first come to Miami-Dade, they undergo an assessment program to determine their basic level of academic preparation. This assessment is made using certain sections of the Comparative Guidance and Placement Program. The CGPP is administered to all full-time "first-time-in-college" students, not as a condition of admission, but rather to provide the College with additional information about the student. The program provides information about student skills in the areas of Reading, Mathematical Computation, and Written English Expression. The results are used in conjunction with other sources of information about the student such as high school records and personal interviews. The goal is to help students understand their own strengths and deficiencies.

After undertaking this analysis of student ability, the College assumes an obligation to match individual skills with the appropriate educational programs. Thus, for example, students who are deficient in any of the three basic skills areas are referred to various academic support programs that are designed to improve student performance. Students must successfully complete the appropriate support programs before moving on to the General Education core curriculum in Communications.

If the student has demonstrated sufficient academic skills, enrollment in the General Education core Communications course can begin immediately. A separate process has been established for assessment of international students. Students must present an acceptable English proficiency score to enter college-level courses; otherwise, they are required to undertake intensive English training until they can demonstrate the appropriate level of English language proficiency.

Students who demonstrate a high level of academic skill may choose to enroll in courses providing honors-level instruction. The College has introduced a comprehensive program for serving superior students through scholarships, visiting professors, cultural events, special services, and recognition. The program is known as Emphasis on Excellence, and it has enhanced the College's ability to inspire faculty, motivate students, and revitalize the general academic environment of the institution.

As the student begins enrollment in the appropriate level of course work, another component of the overall student support system is available to monitor student progress. This is a computerized information system known as Academic Alert and Advisement System. The Academic Alert System requires all faculty members to answer two questions each term about their students: Is student progress satisfactory or unsatisfactory? Is student attendance in class satisfactory or unsatisfactory? Faculty members provide this information during the seventh week of the term by checking the appropriate responses on a classroll. Faculty answers to these questions are combined through a sophisticated computer program with other available student information such as credit load, previous performance, ethnic background, native language, age, and assessment scores. The result is an individualized letter for approximately 40,000 students. The letter gives each student a mid-term progress report and permits the College advisement staff to offer suggestions, directions, and encouragement for successful completion of the current term. The Academic Alert and Advisement System has been well received by students, faculty and administrators.

The College commitment to focus on the individual has required imaginative uses of new communications technologies to minimize the expenditures required for personalized support services. To complement the information on student progress provided by the Academic Alert System, the College initiated a project for using communications technology to enhance the academic advisement process. When you compare the number of students with the number of faculty, simple mathematics will tell you that few colleges have enough faculty or advisors to provide individual advisement to every student. Nevertheless, students require regular, accurate, and consistent information about course selection, degree requirements, and transfer requirements.

To meet this need, a computerized system for academic advisement known as the Advisement and Graduation Information System (AGIS) was developed. The implementation of AGIS represented an important and impressive step in providing individualized service to students. Through AGIS, students have a dependable source of information about their progress toward meeting degree requirements throughout the State of Florida. Additionally, AGIS provides in effect a contract between Miami-Dade, the student and the transfer universities. Each year, upper division institutions within

the State of Florida are asked to provide Miami-Dade with up-to-date descriptions of their program requirements. When students begin their enrollment at Miami-Dade, the AGIS system describes for them the course requirements that they will be expected to fulfill for their chosen program of study.

Standards of Academic Progress

As students enroll from one term to the next, they find superimposed over the entire educational program from entry to exit the Standards of Academic Progress. The Standards represent a system for classifying student academic standing each term. The Standards are designed to monitor routinely academic progress to assure early identification of students experiencing academic difficulties, and to motivate better performance. Students who have not maintained at least a 1.5 cumulative grade point average in earning their first seven credits are placed under Academic Warning. Being under Academic Warning requires participation in intervention courses which concentrate on study skills, career goals, and time management. A reduction in credit load is also imposed on students under Academic Warning. It is the College's way of telling students "you're just starting out; you have not been very successful; we want to help you turn around; and here's how we think we can do it."

The next level of academic standing under the Standards of Academic Progress is Academic Probation. Probation can be obtained by either failing to maintain a 1.5 cumulative grade point average on credits attempted between 17 and 29, or by failing to complete half of the first 17 to 29 credits registered. Again, the College provides special intervention and requires a reduction in course load. If students do not have at least a 2.0 grade point average or have not completed at least half of their courses by the time they reach 29 credits registered, they are *suspended* from the College for one major term. From the Winter Term 1979 when the first suspensions took place through the Fall Term 1980, over 8,000 suspensions have occurred. These suspensions represent

a substantial loss of revenue to the College, since the funding formula that supports the institution is based on student enrollment. But they also represent the fulfillment of Miami-Dade's commitment to impose reasonable expectations for student academic performance.

The reactions from both faculty and students have been positive and supportive, and recent research demonstrates the effectiveness of the Standards of Academic Progress in helping students, in improving the overall academic environment of the College, in improving classroom attendance, and in improving overall student attitudes toward classroom work. Students who have been suspended have an opportunity to re-enroll after they have been out of the institution for at least a major term. If they do return, they must maintain at least a 2.0 average and earn credits in at least half of their work. Failure to accomplish this minimum level of academic performance results in dismissal from the institution. Through the Fall Term 1980, the College had dismissed 946 students.

Conclusion

The restructuring of the educational program at Miami-Dade Community College is being accomplished by combining traditional curriculum reform with modern systems technologies. The Student Flow Model demonstrates the capability of technological sub-systems for supporting a comprehensive program of General Education. For the open door concept to survive in the years ahead, comprehensive experiments such as Miami-Dade's must succeed. A piecemeal approach cannot be used in dealing with the difficult problems of higher education in the 80's; the entire College environment must be redesigned. The systems approach to educational reform that is being implemented at Miami-Dade Community College will help individual students to realize their maximum potential while at the same time enabling the institution to maintain appropriate standards of academic progress.

ASSOCIATE IN ARTS STUDENT FLOW MODEL

